Echoes of Change: Exploring the Intersections of Ecology and Marginality in the Anthropocene through Selected Indian Novels

A Synopsis of the Proposed Ph.D Thesis
in English (PAT-2021-22)
in the Faculty of Humanities

For
Submission to
University Dept. of English
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Introduction:

In the scholarly narrative of the "Anthropocene," a term etched from the Greek roots "Anthropos" (human) and "cene" (new), lies the acknowledgement of humanity's indelible mark on the planet's geological and ecological fabric. This epoch (in the making), heralded by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, encapsulates human activities' profound impact on the Earth, signifying a critical juncture where human history intertwines with geological time. This concept challenges us to reconsider the conventional separation between nature and human agency, highlighting how human activities have intertwined with and influenced the planet's natural systems.

Within this epoch (in the making), the concept of 'marginality' emerges prominently, highlighting the experiences of communities most vulnerable to ecological disruptions. Indigenous peoples and those closely connected to their natural surroundings often bear the brunt of environmental changes. Situated on the margins of global ecological discourse, these groups offer invaluable insights into sustainable living underpinned by a rich heritage of traditional ecological knowledge.

Indian fiction, with its vibrant array of narratives, is a compelling medium to explore the intricacies of the Anthropocene. This research delves into selected Indian novels such as *Valli* by Sheela Tomy (Trans. by Jayasree Kalathil, 2022), *Rising Heat* by Perumal Murugan (Trans. by Janani Kannan, 2020), *Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumba Rao (Trans. by Vasanth Kannabiran, 2020*)*, *Gift in Green* by Sara Joseph (Trans. by Valsan Thampu, 2011), and these narratives weave together the complex tapestry of human and ecological relationships within the Anthropocene, spotlighting the resilience and challenges faced by marginalised communities. This study seeks to unravel the multifaceted stories of human-nature entanglements presented in these literary works. The research attempts to improve our understanding of the ecological and cultural aspects of the Anthropocene by looking at how ecological crises, cultural identities, the resiliency of marginalised communities, and the involvement of local and international nation-states are portrayed. Thus, it would focus on how literature bridges the gap between academic discourse and real-world experiences, providing viewpoints that open doors to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Literature Review:

Some of the previous academic and scholarly works done include "*Valli*: Sheela Tomy's novel set in a Kerala forest is a universal study of human savagery" by Isa Ayidh

(2022), "Into a Green Darkness: Review of Sheela Tomy's *Valli"* by Navamay Sudhish (2022), "Book Review of Sheela Tomy's *Valli*" by Shilpa Nataraj (2023), "Cultural Identity and Identity crisis in Perumal Murugan's novels" by S. Ygnasri (2020), "Fable as a Literary Strategy: An Allegorical Reading of Perumal Murugan's select works" by Christopher Gunjan Kujur (2020), "Thematic Study of Perumal Murugan's Select Novels" by Jayshri Ramnath Chopad (2022), "The Depiction of Rural India in the Selected Novels of Perumal Murugan" by Vijayakumar N.C (2024), "*Gift In Green* by Sarah Joseph: A Creolized Creative Writing" by Jimmy James (2015), "The Politics of Land and the Politics of Gender in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*" by Dr. Asha Susan (2017), "An Eco-spiritual Search for Light and Life in a World Inching towards Dystopia in Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green*" by Dr A. Latha (2018), "Life and Death of Kolleru in Akkineni Kutumba Rao's *Softly Dies A Lake*" by Pallavi Singh (2023).

Other previous scholarly works loosely related to this proposed area include Marginality from a Socio-ecological Perspective, edited by Joachim von Braun and Franz W. Gatzweiler (2014), *Indian Feminist Ecocriticism* by Panchali Bhattacharya, et al. (2022), *Voices of Resistance: Telugu Progressive-Political Literature* by Volga and Kalpana Kannabiran (Eds.), Vasanth Kannabiran (Trans., 2023).

Research Questions:

After reviewing the previous academic works on the selected novels and novelists, I have observed that very few works have been done on the intersections of ecology and marginality in the Anthropocene. Therefore, I have raised many questions: What thematic patterns emerge from previous academic works on the selected Indian works? How do the selected narratives depict the interconnectedness of human lives with their environment within the Anthropocene? In what ways do these stories challenge or reinforce traditional notions of nature and human agency? How is ecocide portrayed in the selected novels, and what are its implications for the socio-cultural fabric of the communities depicted? In what ways do the narratives explore the disintegration of cultural and social structures in response to ecological crises? How do marginalised voices within the selected novels articulate resilience in the face of environmental change? What role does traditional ecological knowledge play in fostering resilience and sustainability in these narratives? How do the selected novels represent the role of local and global nation-states in addressing or exacerbating ecological crises within the Anthropocene?

Objectives of the Thesis:

The objectives of the thesis are manifolds:

1. **Firstly**, this thesis would map and critically assess the thematic patterns identified in previous academic works related to the selected Indian novels, particularly emphasising the themes of ecology and marginality.
2. **Secondly**, this research would explore the intricate dynamics between humans and their environment as depicted in Indian Eco-fiction, assessing how these narratives reflect and challenge conventional perceptions of the natural world and human impact.
3. **Thirdly,** it would examine the representation of ecocide in the selected novels and its ramifications for the socio-cultural landscapes of the communities portrayed, examining how ecological crises lead to cultural and social evolution or decay.
4. **Fourthly,** this thesis aims to investigate the portrayal of marginalised communities in the narratives, focusing on their resilience strategies and the role of traditional ecological knowledge in navigating and adapting to environmental changes.
5. **Fifthly**, this research would examine the local and global nation-states' roles in ecological crises within the Anthropocene.

Research Methodology:

This research on the selected Indian eco-fiction aims to utilise a qualitative approach centred on a comprehensive textual and thematic analysis of selected novels to delve into human-environment interactions.

Theoretical Frameworks in Research Methodology:

The study will be underpinned by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that weaves together ecocriticism, postcolonial and subaltern studies, cultural studies, and indigenous studies. Ecocriticism will guide the exploration of the complex relationships depicted between humans and nature, highlighting ecological concerns and challenges in the Anthropocene era. Postcolonial and subaltern studies will contribute insights into the historical contexts and power dynamics that inform environmental narratives, particularly emphasising the representation of marginalised communities. Cultural studies will enrich the analysis by decoding the cultural identities and practices interwoven with environmental themes. Indigenous studies will provide a perspective on the traditional ecological knowledge and the profound connections indigenous communities maintain with their natural surroundings. This multidisciplinary framework offers a nuanced understanding of the

environmental, cultural, and social issues reflected in the selected Indian eco-fiction, capturing contemporary India's diverse and intricate landscapes.

The Primary and Secondary Sources:

For this study, I have selected four South Indian novels, named *Valli* by Sheela Tomy (Trans. by Jayasree Kalathil, 2022), *Rising Heat* by Perumal Murugan (Trans. by Janani Kannan, 2020), *Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumba Rao (Trans. by Vasanth Kannabiran, 2020*), Gift in Green* by Sara Joseph (Trans. by Valsan Thampu, 2011) as their thematic patterns are identical with my research work. I have selected two male and two female writers to maintain objectivity and present a range of perspectives. The secondary sources *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* by Rob Nixon (2013), *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* by David Schlosberg (2009), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* by Arnold, David, and Ramachandra Guha (2009), *Orientalism* (1978*)* and *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward said (1994) would help me to demonstrate my arguments critically in chapter 4 and chapter 5 in this research. Other secondary sources in this study would include several scholarly works, projects and research related to the proposed research area. As my research work is interdisciplinary, I would also include other secondary sources from different disciplines.

Chapter Plan:

My proposed research would include the following chapters:

Chapter 1: "Introduction"

Chapter 2: "Weaving Nature's Web: Human and Environmental Intersections"

Chapter 3: "The Anthropocene Unravelled: Navigating Ecocide and Socio-Cultural Disintegration"

Chapter 4: "Voices from the Margins: Struggle and Resistance amid Ecological Crisis"

Chapter 5: "Engagement of Local and Global Nation-States in Anthropocene: A Study of 'Populism' and 'Imperialism'"

Chapter 6: "Conclusion"

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Research Coverage:

This proposed research will begin with an introduction that gives a general overview of the Anthropocene, indigenous studies, marginality, Indian eco-fiction, the significance of regional (Malayalam and Tamil) literature (s) and the selected texts with the writers. Then, the research aims to analyse the themes I mentioned in chapters II, III and IV with references from the aforementioned novels, as the three themes are very prominent in all the selected novels. In Chapter V, I will investigate the engagement of both the local and global Nation-states in exploiting/restoring indigenous people in the Anthropocene. In the end, the concluding chapter will present my research findings and attempt to present new areas that need further exploration by new researchers in the future.

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